‘An act hath three branches’: Being and Acting in *Hamlet*

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The Final act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* opens in a graveyard with an extended meditation on dying and death. The two most reliable versions of the play (the second Quarto and the First Folio) record in their stage direction the entry of ‘two Clowns’,[1] though the first character is revealed to be the senior gravedigger or Sexton and the second—the ‘Other’—soon to be dispatched in search of ‘a stoup of liquor’, is most likely his assistant, another gravedigger. The occasion and point of departure for this meditation is the burial of Ophelia:

> CLOWN
> Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she wilfully seeks her own salvation?
>
> OTHER
> I tell thee she is, therefore make her grave straight. The crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.
>
> CLOWN
> How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defence?
>
> OTHER
> Why, ’tis found so.

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 225n. This is the edition cited throughout the article.

> CLOWN
> It must be *se offendendo,* it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is, to act, to do, to perform; argal, she drowned herself wittingly.
>
> OTHER
> Nay, but hear you, goodman delver –
>
> CLOWN
> Give me leave. Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water to drown himself, it is will he nill he, he goes—mark you that. But if the water comes to him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

Whether or not Ophelia has indeed taken her own life, as is suggested here and later by the priest who can offer her only 'maimèd rites' (5. 1. 186), remains unclear. Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death makes it sound accidental (4. 7. 166-83), though how far we are meant to trust this, or indeed whether we should expect consistency on the issue at all, remains a moot point.

Suicide or not, it encourages a comically earnest interchange between the Sexton and his assistant as they seek a more precise legal and theological characterisation of the act. In this apparently casual interchange, and in the one immediately following between Hamlet and the Sexton—who, incidentally, proves to be the only character in the play capable of matching wits with, even outmatching Hamlet—Shakespeare, typically, 'by indirections find[s] directions out' (2. 1. 64), concentrating all the issues that haunt Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play. Image by image, line by line, they are all there in this scene: the questions of power, fate, self-determination, responsibility, mortality, and meaning that have been raised directly by the acutely self-conscious hero, as well as (again indirectly) by incident and recurrent imagery. Ophelia's drowning herself 'in her own defence', for example, echoes Hamlet's meditation on suicide and his famous question of how appropriate it is

> to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them.
>
> (3. 1. 59-60)

As the Sexton composes the scene of mortal confrontation—'Here lies the water—good. Here stands the man—good'—theatrically re-enacting the death in order to prove his case just as Hamlet has had his father's murder theatrically re-enacted to prove his, the metaphor of taking arms against the sea undergoes ironic and intensive realisation. The first to take arms, moreover, as the Sexton reminds us—punning on the heraldic, anatomical, and martial meanings of *arms*—was Adam (5. 1. 33), the same Adam who brought death into the world and the meaning of whose name ('clay' or 'dust') generates the endless wordplay that serves as a constant reminder of human mortality. This is also the same Adam whose sons, Cain and Abel, are invoked by Hamlet (via the striking jowl or jawbone) when the meditation drifts momentarily from mortality to fratricide, reminding us that Claudius's crime re-enacts this 'first murder' (5. 1. 64-6). It is not long before Hamlet is reprising his hysterical demonstration (having killed Polonius) of 'how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar' (4. 3. 28-9) with a morbid fantasy about the world-conqueror, Alexander, 'stopping a bung hole': 'Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth' (5. 1. 172-7).

Prior to this, in a spirit of forensic whimsy comparable with the Sexton's own, Hamlet has reduced the vast estates of an acquisitive lawyer to a graveplot—'The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box, and must th'inheritor himself have no more, ha?' (5. 1. 92-4)—echoing an earlier case of disputed inheritance and perverse scale: Fortinbras's attack on a plot of Polish ground too small to inter the soldiers who will die fighting respectively to protect and acquire it:

> to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain.
>
> (4. 4. 59-65)

The pun on 'plot'—political scheming and the graveyard—holds good throughout the play.

Pre-eminent in this comic re-enactment of the play's themes, however, and the issue I want to focus on in this article, is the question of action. How can the drowned Ophelia be entitled to a Christian burial, asks the Sexton, 'unless she drowned herself in her own defence?' The coroner has ruled otherwise, but the Sexton is convinced 'it must be *se offendendo*', or in her own *of*fence. Editors often gloss this passage by suggesting that the Sexton has garbled the correct legal phrase *se defendendo*, 'a justiable plea in homicide' as the Cambridge editor, Philip Edwards, puts it.[2] But the Sexton knows exactly what he is saying: Ophelia must have meant to *offend* herself, to take her own life: 'For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it argues an act, and an act hath three branches—it is, to act, to do, to perform; argal'—which is to say, *ergo* or *therefore*—'she drowned herself wittingly'. 'There is general agreement', writes Edwards, that Shakespeare is recalling the 'celebrated legal arguments' offered in the case of Sir James Hales, who had drowned himself wittingly in 1554:

> In a suit over whether his lands were thereby forfeit, there was much fine discussion on the nature of the act, including the argument that an act consisted of three parts, the Imagination, the Resolution and the Perfection.[3]

It does not take much imagination or resolution to recreate this legal debate, but if Shakespeare is indeed recalling the Hales case he does so only with his own fine discriminations in mind: 'to act, to do, to perform'. Each of the Sexton's alternatives contains its own ambiguities and collectively they present as at once indistinguishable (synonymous) and yet at the same time subtly distinct, amounting to a repertory of human action. In an interlude, at once comic and choric, the Sexton reminds us that meaning for both the play and the prince turns on the complex, polyvalent infinitive, 'to act'.

Young Hamlet's main plot and purpose, after all, is 'the *acting*' of the ghost's—his father's—'dread command':

> HAMLET [*to the Ghost*]
> What would your gracious figure?
> . . . .

[2] *Hamlet*, ed. Edwards, p. 225n.
[3] *Hamlet*, ed. Edwards, p. 225n.

> Do you not come your tardy son to chide,
> That, laps'd in time and passion, lets go by
> Th'important acting of your dread command?
> O say.
>
> (3. 4. 104ff.)

The same 'dread command', which earlier the young Hamlet had sworn would live all alone 'within the book and volume of [his] brain' (1. 5. 103), remains, of course, *unacted*, and Hamlet's own 'purpose' (and sense of purpose) 'blunted' (3. 4. 110). Three hundred years of Hamlet criticism, it is fair to say, has exerted and often contorted itself in an effort to find out why this should be so, why Hamlet, in Dr Johnson's words, 'is rather the instrument than the agent'.[4] 'Shakespeare meant', in a nutshell, 'to represent the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it', insists Goethe's Wilhelm Meister.[5] One of the first things we remark is the frequency with which, throughout the play, derivatives of the Sexton's infinitives 'to act' (action, acting) and 'to do' (doing, deeds) recur, more often than not in opposition to, or in tension with, 'thought', 'thinking', 'words', and 'discourse'.

> HAMLET
> Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of *thinking* too precisely on the event,
> A *thought* which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward, I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'This thing's *to do*';
> Sith I have cause and will and strength and means
> *To do't*.
>
> (4. 4. 43-6, my italics)

Thoughts and words are seen to cripple action, action in turn defies conceptualisation. 'What have I *done*', asks Gertrude of Hamlet, 'that thou dar'st wag thy tongue | In words so rude against me?' 'Such *an act*', explains Hamlet, 'such *a deed*', that Heaven itself 'Is *thought-sick* at the *act*' (3. 4. 39-51, my italics). 'To be or not to be' asks Hamlet in arguably the most famous line in all literature, 'that is the question' (3. 1. 56). But

[4] Brian Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage [1623-1801]*, in 6 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974-81), vol. 5, p. 161.
[5] Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 306.

it is only one question. The far more urgent question is how or whether or when to act: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to act or not to act. Whether to be *is* to act, or whether it is something quite separate. (And this even before we explore the pregnant confusion of 'acting' as both doing and pretending to do.)

Let me start by looking at the famous interpretation of *Hamlet* by the Romantic poet and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the first great character critics. Of all Coleridge's readings of Shakespeare, performed in public lectures given over a period of ten years from 1808, it is that of Hamlet which has proved most influential, both in criticism and in the theatre. Here are the notes taken by the recorder, John Payne Collier, at the lecture on *Hamlet* Coleridge delivered on 2 January 1812:

> [Shakespeare] meant to pourtray a person in whose view the <external> world and all its incidents <and objects> were comparatively dim, and of no interest of themselves, and which began to interest only when they were reflected in the mirror of his mind. . . .
>
> Shakespeare places him in the most stimulating circumstances that a human being can be placed in: he is the heir apparent of the throne: his father dies suspiciously: his mother excludes him from the throne by marrying his uncle. This was not enough but the Ghost of the murdered father is introduced to assure the son that he was put to death by his own brother. What is the result? Endless reasoning and urging—perpetual solicitation of the mind to act, but as constant an escape from action—ceaseless reproaches of himself <for his sloth>, while the whole energy of his resolution passes away in those reproaches. This, too, not from cowardice, for he is made one of the bravest of his time—not from want of forethought or quickness of apprehension, for he sees through the very souls of all who surround him, but merely <from> that aversion to action which prevails among such as have a world within themselves.[6]

[6] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 5, ed. R. A. Foakes, in 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 386.

Coleridge's Hamlet is a victim of his own restless intellect and intense introspection, paralysed not in spite of, but precisely because of his being 'deeply acquainted with his own feelings, painting them with such wonderful power & accuracy':

> the aversion to externals, the betrayed Habit of brooding over the world within him, and the prodigality of beautiful words, which are as it were the half-embodyings of Thought, that make them more than Thought, give them an outness, a reality sui generis and yet retain their correspondence and shadowy approach to Images and Movements within.[7]

Hamlet is also, in other words, a victim of his own noble imagination, overcome by 'a sense of imperfectness' in a world incommensurate with his high ideals.[8] Having retired into his mind, Hamlet has transmuted a political into an ideal world in protest against inhibitions placed on his imagination. It is this, more than anything, that makes Coleridge's Hamlet so characteristically Romantic, treading as he does a fine line between vision and narcissism, first cousin once or twice removed of the poet in Shelley's *Alastor*. And it is this that makes Hamlet, for many of the Romantics, Shakespeare's greatest creation.

In the end, Coleridge reverts to a moral and what we can legitimately call *Classical* reading of the play as an affirmation of action as 'the great end of existence'. With every new provocation to action Hamlet 'still yields to the same retiring from all reality' and 'seizes hold of a pretext for not acting': 'he is all meditation, all resolution <a far as words are concerned>, but all hesitation & irresolution when called upon to act; so that resolving to do everything he <in fact> does nothing'.[9] In spite of this, however, all the emotional weight of Coleridge's extended analysis is on Hamlet's side. The Prince of Denmark remains more heroic for having retired from reality than he could ever have been indulging in the vulgar activism of a Laertes or a Fortinbras.

The reason for Coleridge's critical ambivalence towards the Prince is not hard to find. Coleridge's friends all recognised the extent to which his Hamlet was modelled on himself, indeed Henry Crabb Robinson

[7] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 540
[8] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 388.
[9] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 390.

doubted 'whether he did not design an application to himself': 'Somebody said to me, this is a Satire on himself; No, said I, it is an elegy'.[10] Aloof from and superior to the world around him, Coleridge's Hamlet remains an essentially heroic figure who comes to occupy an archetypal place in the new spiritual hierarchy of the Romantics, a hero distinguished by his philosophical and poetic imagination. Coleridge, after all, was not the only one who saw himself in Hamlet. At different times throughout the nineteenth century, artists of the stature of Goethe, Beethoven, Byron, Victor Hugo, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Berlioz, Lermentov, Dostoevsky, *all* saw themselves as Hamlet—or as *a* Hamlet. To characterise what the Romantics felt about Hamlet it is conventional to resort to critical commentary, as I have done in citing Coleridge's lectures. I could as easily have gone to August Wilhelm Schlegel—though for a very different Hamlet—or to William Hazlitt, or before them all to Wilhelm Meister's long digression in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.[11] But formal critical analyses like these only tell us part of the story. Moody, disaffected, melancholic, caustic, lyrical, emotionally manipulative—Byron made a persona and a career out of the Prince of Denmark, and Europe followed suit. The identification of these artists and intellectuals, it is interesting to note, was not with Hamlet's author (as fascinated as they were by Shakespeare's genius), but with what is, after all, only a character in a play, a fiction.

If Coleridge, then, was not the only modern sensibility who has fancied himself, however fleetingly, as Hamlet, Coleridge nevertheless gives us a strong intimation as to why Hamlet has functioned in this way, and why there has developed in the modern world what we can call a Hamlet-syndrome. Talking in the preface to his *Poems* (1853) about why he had renounced his own poem *Empedocles on Etna*, Matthew Arnold is more explicit and more disapproving in reading Hamlet as the harbinger of a Romantic modernity. In *Empedocles*, writes Arnold:

> I intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers, one of the family of Orpheus and Musaeus, having survived his fellows, living on into a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail. Into the feelings of a man so situated

[10] Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, vol. 1, p. 391.
[11] Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, pp. 303-52.

> there entered much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern; how much, the fragments of Empedocles himself which remain to us are sufficient at least to indicate. What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared: the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust.[12]

Arnold identified in Hamlet a modern, autonomous, and conflicted consciousness: a characteristically modern tendency towards a vertiginous and paralysing self-reflexiveness, encouraged by a sense of living at a critical moment of history and of having to negotiate unprecedented changes.

> The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite
> That ever I was born to set it right!
> (1. 5. 188-9)

We witness the intense privacies of the self as personality, a subjectivity that would become characteristic of the progressively more democratic world that lay on the far side of Elizabethan England, when every man would become a prince and the age would grow 'so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe' (5. 1. 117-18). Since the early nineteenth century, writes Huw Griffiths, 'there has rarely been a time in which our view of Hamlet has not reflected what it means to be a modern man. More than this, at times our view of what it means to be Hamlet has come to define what it means to be human'.[13]

As Coleridge suggests, Hamlet's imagination and idealism isolate him from the action. There can be no doubt that Coleridge exaggerates this isolation, no less than he ignores much of the selfishness and *schadenfreude* ('malicious joy') that offended Schlegel and, in the twentieth century, G. Wilson Knight:

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[12] Matthew Arnold, *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 203.
[13] Huw Griffiths (ed.), *Shakespeare, Hamlet: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 21.

> Hamlet is not flesh and blood, he is a spirit of penetrating intellect and cynicism and misery without faith in himself or anyone else, murdering his love of Ophelia, on the brink of insanity, taking delight in cruelty, torturing Claudius, wringing his mother's heart, a poison in the midst of the healthy bustle of the court.[14]

What is certain, however, is that for Hamlet the questioning becomes a way of not doing anything. Hamlet's refusal to avenge his father's death is, at the very least, ironic in that his protracted meditations on the virtues of decisiveness and action only postpone decision and paralyse action. So irrepressibly cerebral and verbal a character is this prince that in four to five hours—'the play is huge', crows Harold Bloom, 'Shakespeare's longest because Hamlet speaks so much of it'[15]—he manages to touch on just about everything that can be said about life, death, and the universe, and everything that can be said about *his own place* in life, death, and the universe. 'To be, or not to be' is not just a weighing of the relative merits of survival and suicide—though it is that, and Hamlet goes on to talk of our fear of 'the undiscover'd country from whose bourn | No traveller returns' (3. 1. 79-80). The question 'to be, or not to be', with its ponderous infinitives, is also a question about what we *are*, about what a piece of work man *is*. A morbid, melancholy Hamlet may be 'thinking too precisely on th'event', as he says (4. 4. 41), considering the matter 'too curiously', as Horatio suggests (5. 1. 174), but the questions themselves are not going to go away: what does it mean to be human; what does it mean to be?

It is, of course, Hamlet himself who is the first to remark on the irony of his own self-consciousness, the first to diagnose his own diseased will to action and to reflect on the paralysing effect of his own reflectiveness.

> HAMLET
> the native hue of resolution
> Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
> And enterprises of great pith and moment

[14] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, second edition (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 38. For the Schlegel, see Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 309.
[15] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), pp. 383, 423.

> With this regard their currents turn awry,
> And lose the name of action.
> (3. 1. 84-8)

All of Shakespeare's tragic heroes have their moments of lucid self-reflection—even Lear and Othello, as profoundly obtuse as the two of them can be in their own ways. But only Hamlet consistently anticipates, consistently pre-empts analysis, seeming to know more than his audience because he is, preeminently and narcissistically, his own audience. Being so acute, and so acutely self-conscious, Hamlet is also acutely self-critical. The moment requires his immediate and princely attention and Hamlet retreats into thought and into language, and into thought as language:

> HAMLET
> Why, what an ass I am! This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab
> (2. 2. 535-9)

Yet this self-criticism—Hamlet's effort to exert some intellectual control over his world—serves only to highlight his lack of understanding and to exacerbate his lack of control over circumstances. In a moment of devastating irony, having witnessed the precipitate action of the Norwegian army, Hamlet resolves 'from this time forth, | My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth' (4. 4. 66-7). It is not his *thoughts* he should be encouraging, of course, but his *actions*.

The paradigm behind the notion of self-consciousness is a theatrical one, and here the ambiguity of the word *acting* becomes especially relevant and carries a special charge. In Hamlet, 'history' becomes the 'histrionic', as acting (doing) takes the place of acting (pretending to do). What we witness in the play is the way the very idea of interiority—of having 'that within', as Hamlet protests to his mother, 'which passeth show'—generates the possibility, indeed from a social point of view the necessity, of duplicity, of a gap between seeming and being:

QUEEN
Thou know'st 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.

HAMLET
Ay, madam, it is common.

QUEEN If it be
Why seems it so particular with thee?

HAMLET
Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'.
'Tis not alone my inky coat, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passeth show —
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.
(1. 2. 72-86)

Here Hamlet's 'actions that a man might play' subtly insinuate the whole issue of performance, the distinction itself (between seeming and being) coming from a consummate actor who cannot act to revenge his father. How are we to interpret what L. C. Knights calls 'Hamlet's habitual tendency to make everything, even what he deeply feels, into a matter of play-acting'? 'Again and again', explains Knights, 'intrinsic values, direct relations, are neglected whilst he tries out various roles before a real or imagined audience'.[16] Indeed, so consummate an actor is Hamlet that to this day criticism remains unable to settle the issue of his most challenging and provoking role—his madness—a challenge as much to our understanding of madness itself, it should be said, as it is to our understanding of the character. How far is madness an escape from the burden of expectation into self-protective 'play-acting'?

[16] L. C. Knights, 'An Approach to *Hamlet*' [1960], in his *Some Shakespearean Themes and An Approach to Hamlet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 157-219 (p. 201).

It is no coincidence, then, that there should be a play at the very heart of the play. Hamlet welcomes the players, before showing off his familiarity (and comfort) with the theatre, and with theatrical illusion, by teaching them to suck eggs:

> HAMLET
> Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.
>
> (3. 2. 14-29)

Hamlet welcomes the players, but especially 'He that plays the king': 'his majesty shall have tribute of me' (2. 2. 318). A good deal might be said on statecraft as performance and of Shakespeare's metaphorical use of the stage. The very least we derive from this gesture is Hamlet's own cynical conflation of majesty with melodrama, as well as a parenthetical jibe at his uncle's comporting himself in borrowed robes—'these are actions that a man might play'—and acting the part that had come 'naturally' to Hamlet's own father. The cynicism is potentially larger than just Hamlet's, however, as the play worries away at the idea of performance as somehow constitutive of what and whom we are, and at the impossibility of achieving any kind of integrity or authenticity beyond 'acting'—which is to say, beyond 'pretending to do', with its repertory of gestures and livery of costumes—the authenticity that Hamlet aspires to in his protest to his mother, and that Polonius envisions in his famous injunction to the parting Laertes:

> This above all, to thine own self be true,
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou can'st not then be false to any man.
> (1. 3. 78-80)

Self-consciousness makes us actors in our own dramas, especially (though not exclusively) when we move onto the public stage that is society. At what point does what we are—Polonius's 'own self'—subsume and authenticate the actions and emotions others expect of us, or that we expect of ourselves? Unable to find the grief 'within' that he should be feeling for his father's death, Hamlet beholds with envy the grief that the players 'act out':

> O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit
> That from her working all his visage wanned,
> Tears in his eyes, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing?
> For Hecuba!
> What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
> That he should weep for her? What would he do,
> Had he the motive and the cue for passion
> That I have?
> (2. 2. 502-13)

Meanwhile, back on the battlefield, young Fortinbras, all thoughtless action, hovers in the margins of the play as Hamlet's opposite or anti-type, ironically the true 'son' or inheritor of Hamlet's heroic father in this generational drama. In Fortinbras we witness an unreflective expeditiousness and a (surely irrational and indiscriminate) commitment to military honour, one that is deaf to philosophical and ethical scruple. Having said earlier that for the Romantics Hamlet became a new kind of spiritual hero, I hasten to qualify by saying otherwise that it is not often enough remarked just what an unlikely tragic hero the Prince of Denmark in fact is, 'as little of the hero', to quote William Hazlitt, 'as a man can well be'.[17] Indeed, Hamlet's protracted dithering—his unwillingness to resolve and 'perfect' or realise—makes the play decidedly *un*heroic in a

[17] Bate (ed.), *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, p. 325.

strict Aristotelian sense. 'A tragedy', according to Aristotle, 'is a *mimesis* of a high, complete action', an imitation of 'people *doing* things'. (Aristotle's word is *prattontōn*, meaning 'people performing responsible and morally characterisable actions'.) Again, sliding between literature and life:

> A tragedy is a *mimesis* not of people but of their actions and life. Both success and ill success are success and ill success in action—in other words, the end and aim of human life is doing something, not just being a certain sort of person.[18]

Hamlet the character and *Hamlet* the play, then, stand as a challenge to the Aristotelian primacy of behaviour and action. Hamlet's seemingly endless soliloquising and philosophising are not just unheroic, they are also mock-heroic. As a literary genre or trope, the mock-heroic is equivocal or double-edged. For while Hamlet's remaining incommensurate with his father's 'dread command' diminishes or mocks him as a tragic hero, at the same time the play also mocks the very *idea* or *ideal* of the heroic that Hamlet has inherited and which he invokes to humiliate and punish himself, a masculine or masculinist, largely military ideal. Hamlet's seemingly inexplicable reluctance to fulfill his destiny turns out to be no less a critique of that destiny, in other words, than it is of Hamlet himself. Both are inarticulate or 'out of joint'.

It is at this point that the questions of meaning and value in the play—whether to act or not to act; whether to be is to act—merge with the family romance. There are, after all, two Hamlets in the play and the first Hamlet introduced to the audience is not Hamlet the son, but Hamlet the father (or at least the ghost of Hamlet the father), whose name is first mentioned (1. 1. 84) much earlier than is young Hamlet's (1. 1. 170). And as there are two Hamlets, so are there two Fortinbrases, involving the succession plot in a neat chiasmus or cross over as Fortinbras the son recovers lands from the dying Prince Hamlet that had been ceded to the late King Hamlet by Fortibras the father. To describe the ideal of the heroic under which young Hamlet labours uneasily as one that he 'inherited' is almost pedantically appropriate, for it comes with the genes, no less than with the culture. The image of Hamlet the King conjured by

[18] Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in a New Translation*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), pp. 92, 97-9.

the play is, like that of his ghost, handsome, valiant, austere, proud, aloof, decisive, expeditious, *demanding*—in all, 'so majestical'. Horatio immediately recognises in the apparition that appears before them on the ramparts

> that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometimes march . . .
> Such was the very armour he had on
> When he th'ambitious Norway combated;
> So frowned he once, when in an angry parle
> He smote the sledded Polacks
> With martial stalk.
>
> (1. 1. 47-9; 61-3)

And again:

> Our last king,
> Whose image even but now appear'd to us,
> Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
> Thereto prick'd on by a most emulate pride,
> Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet--
> For so this side of our known world esteem'd him--
> Did slay this Fortinbras;
>
> (1. 1. 83-7)

More to the point, this is the way Hamlet the father appears to Hamlet the son, who invokes him in a formal, hyperbolic style that (rather like the Marlovian moment of Priam and Hecuba recreated by the players) borders on the comic:

> HAMLET
> Look here, upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
> Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;
> An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
> A combination and a form indeed,
> Where every god did seem to set his seal,

> To give the world assurance of a man:
> This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:
> Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,
> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
> (3. 5. 53-65)

'So excellent a king, that was'—compared with his successor, Claudius—'Hyperion to a satyr' (1. 2. 139-40). But if Gertrude thinks that the lady in the play protests too much, how much too much does Hamlet protest his love and admiration for his dead father—for his father's many heroic attributes and heroic values? For all his insight, Hamlet is blinded by the brilliance of the Titanic sun-god, Hyperion, who is his father, and 'as his memory of his father pushes increasingly in the direction of idealization', as Janet Adelman has remarked, 'Hamlet becomes more acutely aware of his own distance from that idealization'.[19]

There are, as it happens, alternatives in the play to the oppressive rectitude and martial glory of Hamlet the King, who (in a colloquial phrase that is uncannily apposite) proves to be a hard act to follow. Gertrude, for example, escapes into the less demanding, more sensual and self-gratifying world of Claudius, only to have her nose rubbed in her own vulnerable humanity during a visitation from her dead husband's son. More to the point, back in the graveyard scene where we began this discussion, we are given a glimpse of a very different kind of fatherhood from the patriarchal ideal represented by Hamlet senior, as different as can be imagined ('fancy' being one of the keywords):

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that.
> (5. 1. 156-65)

[19] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 13.

Hamlet's gorge rises at the memory and he is quick to adopt the attitude that has since become iconic, with the melancholy prince addressing the skull of Yorick, aloft, and transforming it, reductively, into a *memento mori*. The episode in fact speaks volumes, obliquely, not just about death but also about life. We become aware that Hamlet is haunted by the ghost of two dead fathers, not one: the first an aloof male figure issuing *ex cathedra* demands that paralyse his unwilling son, the second the carnival, feminising imago of Yorick, lord of play ('he hath borne me upon his back a thousand times'), of song and jest and fancy, and of affection ('those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft')—a surrogate father *and* mother to the young Hamlet. The self-mockery, the sudden and compulsive 'flashes of merriment' so characteristic of Hamlet and so threatening to the image of a noble Hamlet, both in the play and for subsequent literary criticism—these would appear to derive from this surrogate father. 'We are to take Notice', wrote George Stubbes in *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet* (1736), 'that the Poet has mix'd a vein of Humour in the Prince's Character which is to be seen in many Places of this Play'.[20] It is Hamlet's inability to discipline these histrionic, carnival propensities in line with the 'dread command' that is his real father that leads to the rapid changes of mood and idiom that (again, both in the play and for subsequent literary criticism) invite speculation about his madness. And that leads, perhaps, to an inability to act.

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[20] Vickers (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 3, p. 58.